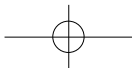
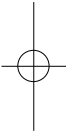


sash&trim



sash&trim

and other plays

by
Djola Branner

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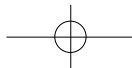
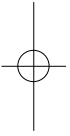
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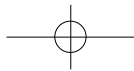
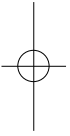
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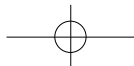
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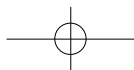
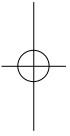




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FOREWORD

by E. Patrick Johnson

Galvanized by an insurgent call for the recognition of LGBT rights in general and the contributions of black LGBT artists and activists in particular, Djola Branner and others like him are picking up the mantel passed on by black queer artists like Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Assotto Saint and Melvin Dixon. The contributions of those seminal figures of the 1970s and '80s, precursors to the black gay renaissance of the new millennium, were cut short and all but eliminated by the AIDS epidemic. Indeed, the impact of HIV/AIDS reverberated throughout the black LGBT artistic community with such ferocity that many believed we would never regain the level of productivity of black queer work that these fallen giants produced. However shattered, those left standing in the wake of that devastating time, like Branner, understood that not only should the work be done, but that it *must* be done.

The historical backdrop for the black queer renaissance of the 1980s was the feminist of color movement of the 1970s. Black and Latina straight and lesbian activists, writers and playwrights were fighting for inclusion in the larger, mostly white feminist movement while critiquing sexism and homophobia within their home communities. This double-edged intervention made it possible to forge a space for the creation of critical and artistic work that reflected the lives of lesbians and feminists of color within and outside communities of color. One of the most important of these artistic interventions was Ntozake Shange's 1975 play *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. Serving as a black feminist manifesto, the play not only pushed the form and content of traditional theater practice, it also stretched the black body politic by moving from margin to center the voice of the straight black woman. The impact has been an unprecedented number of riffs and spoofs of Shange's title, all of which have been deployed to continue Shange's radical intervention, but with a queer twist: Keith Antar Mason's *for colored boys who have considered homicide when the streets were too*

much and Marvin K. White's *for colored boyz who have considered the s-curl when the hot comb was too much*, to name just two.

Additionally, Shange's work paved the way for black artists who would also challenge and extend the boundaries of black theater. Pomo Afro Homos (of which Branner was an original member, along with Brian Freeman and Eric Gupton) in *Fierce Love: Stories From Black Gay Life* handled such topics as homophobia in black communities, internalized homophobia among black gay men and racism in white gay communities. Pomo Afro Homos as well as other performance artists and playwrights such as Reginald T. Jackson, Shay Youngblood, George C. Wolfe, Sharon Bridgforth, Marvin K. White and Lenelle Moïse have continued to expand the boundaries of "black" art by experimenting with form, as well as by bringing to the fore questions of gender and sexuality.

Djola Branner continues this tradition in this collection, *sash & trim and other plays*. Each of them in their own way takes the reader on a journey through blackness and queerness in ways that stretch the imagination and chronicle the history of black peoples in the diaspora—a history that cannot be told without chronicling the lives of its same-gender loving ancestors.

While writing within an undeniable black aesthetic that draws on themes of spirit possession, ritual, vernacular speech, music, folklore and ancestor worship, Branner also incisively showcases how sexuality in all of its many manifestations is a story that must be told within black history. Whether it is through the character Rafael in *oranges & honey* seeking healing from molestation in Oshun; archetypal characters in the musical farce, *the house that crack built*, commenting on the state of our war on drugs; black women in *cover* dealing with down-low brothers and the complexity of HIV/AIDS contagion in this contemporary moment; or a family in *sash & trim* trying to come to terms with its past and new definitions of fatherhood and masculinity; these plays provide a complicated view of black community that does not resort to stereotype to tell the story. They raise more questions than they answer in order to engage the reader in the search for his or her own truth. Unlike the didactic

plays circulating on what might be considered a modern day chitlin' circuit, whose characters are one-dimensional and storylines cliché, Branner has given us in *sash & trim and other plays* a collection that is not always easy to digest or understand at a surface level. Subtlety and nuance trump conspicuousness and literalness in all of these plays, rendering stories of black people that are indeed as complex as the history of black life in the diaspora.

Regarding this last point, what is also unique about many of the pieces in *sash & trim and other plays* is the connection Branner makes between African and Latin peoples. Many of the characters speak Spanish alongside English and black vernacular, which calls attention to the history of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is an important component because it underscores the fact that blackness is formed and circulated from multiple geographies and histories, which complicates narratives that suggest that North American blackness is the most "authentic." The appearance of African deities like Oshun in the plays reveals the connections between African cosmology and religious practices such as Candomblé, Santería and Vodun/Voodoo in Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States, and remarks on the migration of blackness across the Atlantic and back again. Moreover, it is important to note that it is within these diasporic religious practices where gender and sexuality is more fluid. Typically, music is the generative force of spirit possession—both in Afro-Latin religions and U.S. black protestant worship practices. In *oranges & honey* Branner makes this connection through the use of house music, which shares the same rhythmic timing of much Afro-Latin ritual music and gospel music. On the dance floor, house music generates a feeling of ecstasy; in the black church, gospel music, along with the syncopation of stomping feet and clapping hands, the drums, bass and lead guitar and tambourine, also transport one to the liminal space between here and now and the beyond, where time is suspended and the body gives way to the hold of the spirit. In Cuban Yoruba and Bahian Candomblé, when an orisha takes hold of someone gender becomes fluid, blurring the line between

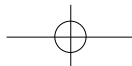
spirituality and sexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality, femininity and masculinity. *oranges & honey* reflects all of these connections between diasporic blackness, gender fluidity, house music, religion, sexuality and spirituality and how they are intertwined to create a site of healing. In general, ritual is a feature in all of the plays, which reflects Branner's commitment to a black aesthetic that not only complicates blackness, but also places gender and queerness at its center.

Ultimately, what Djola Branner has given us with these plays is a resting place—arresting time and space. A place to come take a sip of, dip in or float on the abiding waters of queer blackness. How refreshing these waters in the midst of these perilous times. This work is fierce. This work is holy. This work *is*. Ashé.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great many thanks to a great many people for participating in the realization of this work. To Shawn Hamilton, Lance McCready, Sonja Parks, Faye Price, Andre Samples, Ellena Schoop, Roxane Wallace and Ronnell Wheeler for lending their voices during early workshops of the material... to composer/collaborator Aaron Barnell for bringing my lyrics to life... to Noel Raymond, Heidi Hunterbatz and all the folks at Pillsbury House Theater for continued support... to Taylor Clark and Jan Thompson Dicks for their amazing “children’s” book entitled *The House That Crack Built*... to the incomparable Laurie Carlos for extracting twelve meanings from one line of text... to the Minneapolis Playwright’s Center... to Patrick Scully and Patrick’s Cabaret for supporting the development of *so* many of these plays... to my playwriting mentors at Actors Studio Drama School/New School for Drama: Pippin Parker, Frank Pugliese, Christopher Shinn and *especially* Laura Maria Censabella for inviting me to imagine my parent’s first date... to New WORLD Theater for working tirelessly to bring my work and the work of other artists of color to the stage for over two decades... to my colleagues at Hampshire College: (Professor Emeritus) Wayne Kramer, Ellen Donkin, Peter Kallok, Natalie Sowell, Talya Kingston, Beth Smolin, Amy Putnam and Will MacAdams who continually support, challenge and inspire my creative voice... to (past and present) members of my writing circle: Marcus Gardley, Lenelle Moise, Priscilla Page and Onawumi Jean Moss for being vital sounding boards... to Lisa C. Moore and my RedBone family for advancing the conversation between *all* people of African descent... to E. Patrick Johnson for pouring such sweet tea... to long time friend/poet Joy Russell for her insight and humor... to Kym Moore for enlightened direction... to Tom Borrup and Harry Waters, Jr. for sharing their tropical haven... to Carson Reinart for holding my hand through multiple revisions... to my beloved Aunt Pauline for helping me to remember my father’s lyrics/melodies and singing/humming them into my ear... and lastly, to all the characters, real and imagined, sacred and

profane, who strutted boldly through my consciousness and entrusted me with their stories... many, *many* thanks.



PUNCTUATION

Wikipedia offers up as good a definition as any:

“Punctuation marks are SYMBOLS that indicate the structure and organization of written language, as well as INTONATIONS and PAUSES to be observed when reading aloud.”

SYMBOLS

Frankly, I started using lowercase letters as a nod to my mentors—Ntozake Shange, Laurie Carlos and Lucille Clifton (to name a few). The lower case “i” in particular seemed to indicate humility, an acknowledgment that greater forces were guiding the writer’s craft. In recent years, I’ve come to believe my best writing is indeed a collaboration between those greater forces, and the unique lens of my own cultural and artistic experience. Succinctly, lowercase letters acknowledge the fact that I am not alone.

INTONATION

My intention is always to record the music in my head/imagination as accurately as I can. By music, I mean not only lyrics, but rhythm and syntax as well. I use italics sparingly because I’m counting on each reader/actor to bring his/her/their own experience to the work, and interpret the text accordingly. Occasionally, I invoke strong statements by using CAPS; but again, I’m relying on the reader/actor to interpret this notation.

When I listen carefully, I notice how often people change thoughts midstream: how often we do *not* speak in complete sentences, particularly when we’re excited. Moreover, we often speak at the same time, complete each other’s sentences, and cut each other off. Forward slashes / indicate moments in which dialogue is overlapping; dashes — indicate when one character is cutting another one off.

